

Labor and Public Employees Committee

Public Testimony of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)
H.B. 6595 and SB. 1002: *An Act Concerning Labor Matters Related To Covid-19, Personal Protective Equipment And Other Staffing Issues.*

Submitted by: Madeline Granato, Policy Director

March 11, 2021

The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide, nonprofit organization that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved and marginalized. For forty-seven years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate in the development of policy solutions that advance women's economic security, combat discrimination, and increase gender equity in Connecticut.

CWEALF urges the Committee to support H.B. 6595 and S.B. 1002: *An Act Concerning Labor Matters Related To Covid-19, Personal Protective Equipment And Other Staffing Issues* which will address workers' rights issues related to COVID-19.

CWEALF supports each section of this critical legislation to provide much needed relief to workers on the frontlines of the COVID-19 crisis, the majority of whom are women and people of color. CWEALF especially supports Sections 20-25 which will provide COVID-19 specific paid sick leave to all workers in the state.

Sections 20-25 of H.B. 6595 and S.B. 1002 will provide all workers, regardless of employer size, with up to 80 hours of COVID-19 paid sick leave in addition to other paid sick leave already provided by the employer or required under Connecticut's existing paid sick leave statute (Sec. 31-57r - 31-57w). Workers can utilize COVID-19 paid sick leave when they are unable to perform their job, including through telework, due to the following reasons related to COVID-19:

- a. An employee's need to self-isolate and care for themselves because they were diagnosed with COVID-19, because they are experiencing symptoms, seek preventive care concerning COVID-19, or seek or obtain medical diagnosis, care or treatment if experiencing symptoms of COVID-19;
- b. An employee's need to comply with an order or determination to self-isolate if their physical presence on the job or in the community would jeopardize their health, the health of other employees or the health of an individual in the employee's household because of possible exposure to COVID-19 or if they are exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19, regardless of diagnosis
- c. An employee's need to take care of a family member due to the same circumstances listed in a or b. Section 20 (4) defines family member as the employee's spouse,

child, parent, grandparent, grandchild or sibling, whether related to the employee by blood, marriage, adoption or foster care, or an individual related to the employee by blood or affinity whose close association with the employee is the equivalent of those family relationships.

- d. An employee's inability to work or telework because they are prohibited from working by the employer due to health concerns related to potential transmission of COVID-19 or are subject to a quarantine or isolation order related to COVID-19
- e. An employee's need to take care of a child or other family member when their care provider is unavailable due to COVID-19 or if the child's or family member's school or place of care has been closed due to COVID-19, including if a school or place of care is physically closed by providing virtual learning, requires or makes optional virtual learning instruction, or requires or makes available a hybrid of in person and virtual learn instruction
- f. An employee's inability to work because of a health condition that may increase their susceptibility to or risk of COVID-19 including but not limited to: age, heart disease, asthma, lung disease, diabetes, kidney disease or a weakened immune system

Though Connecticut became the first state in the nation in 2011 to require certain employers to provide paid sick leave to certain workers, the law leaves out workers at small employers of less than 50 employees and only applies to certain service workers. Research shows that between 200,000-400,000 workers are left out of Connecticut's existing law.

Last March, the federal Families First Coronavirus Relief Act (FFCRA) required certain employers to provide employees with paid sick leave or expanded family and medical leave for specified reasons related to COVID-19. The FFCRA also provided refundable tax credits to small and midsize employers that reimbursed them, dollar-for-dollar, for the cost of providing paid sick and family leave wages to their employees for leave related to COVID-19.

Research indicates that the paid leave provisions included in the FFCRA were successful in "flattening the curve" of COVID-19 transmissions and reduced the transmission of COVID-19 in certain areas by 400 cases per day; however, the law was temporary and loopholes excluded an estimated 68 million - 106 million private sector workers nationwide.

The most recent federal relief package continues tax credits to employers who voluntarily provide paid leave but does not require that employers do so. Tax credits alone are not enough to ensure access to paid leave to all workers regardless of occupation or job title. This makes Section 20-25 even more critical: if employers will reap a financial benefit from the federal government, Connecticut must also act to ensure universal access to COVID-19 sick leave to all workers.

Gaps in federal relief packages and in existing state law have left workers on the frontline of the pandemic, who are disproportionately women and people of color, without access to any paid sick leave. This puts essential workers, their families, co-workers and

communities at risk. Workers without paid sick days are more than twice as likely to seek emergency room care for themselves, a child or a relative because they can't take time away from work during normal business hours to obtain routine care, which leads to higher health insurance costs and medical expenses.

Healthy workers are the foundation of a thriving economy and are essential to keep businesses open and safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. When workers have access to paid sick leave, they demonstrate increased job satisfaction and morale. This leads to increased worker productivity and performance and reduced turnover, which improves a business' bottom line.

CWEALF strongly supports H.B. 6595 and S.B. 1002, with one recommended amendment to Section 21 2(b) lines 1117-1127.

Though Section 21 is effective from passage, current language states COVID-19 sick leave will be available for use beginning on the earlier of: (1) September 1, 2021 or (2) the date the employee is hired, provided the employee is hired during the time period of the public health emergency declared by the Governor on March 10, 2020. *CWEALF recommends amending this language to make COVID-19 paid sick leave available **seven days following the effective date of this section.***

This change will ensure that workers have access to COVID-19 specific paid sick leave more immediately as they continue to go to work through the public health crisis.

Women and communities of color are already experiencing the most severe economic fallout from the pandemic, and inequities in access to critical workplace policies like paid sick leave only deepens the impact of COVID-19 on their economic security.

CWEALF urges the Committee and lawmakers to advance H.B. 6595 and S.B. 1002.

Thank you.